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ABSTRACT

The extent to which 46 special education teachers judged the mathematics performance of a fourth grader to be a function of his handicapping condition and/or his competence was evaluated. A videotape presentation and brief case study were reviewed and teachers were asked the extent to which various attributes were influential in the child's performance. Difficulties were indicated for both labels and levels of competence. Results indicated that competence was a more powerful influence with regard to attributions for academic behavior than labels assigned. Teachers felt that the child's future performance would be similar to his past performance, which could be beneficial (as when success breeds success) or harmful (as when teachers may be unwilling to alter their expectations in light of contradictory performance). (Author/CL)

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EFFECTS OF LABELS AND COMPETENCE ON TEACHERS' ATTRIBUTIONS FOR A STUDENT

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Abstract

The extent to which special education teachers judged the mathematics performance of a fourth grade youngster to be a function of his handicapping condition and/or his competence was evaluated. A videotape presentation and brief case study were reviewed and participating teachers were asked the extent to which various attributes were influential in the child's performance. Differences were indicated for both labels and levels of competence. The results are discussed with regard to previous research and implications for reducing the effects of labels.

Effects of Labels and Competence on

Teachers' Attributions for a Student

The process of labeling and classifying children for purposes of providing special education services has become quite prevalent (Salvia & Ysseldyke, 1978); issues related to diagnostic-prescriptive decision-making have been identified and are being investigated (Ysseldyke, 1979; Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1979). Attempts to study labeling are often confounded by confusion with other separate but related areas of concern (i.e., test bias, placement, etc.); in fact, the labeling issue is relatively straight forward. Of concern is what happens when a categorical label is assigned to a child (Algozzine & Mercer, in press).

To some extent, effects of the major special education labels of mental retardation (MR), learning disabilities (LD) and emotional disturbance (ED) have been investigated. A considerable amount of recent research has indicated that these labels have negative effects (Algozzine & Mercer, in press; Algozzine & Sutherland, 1977; Copeland & Weissbrod, 1976; Foster & Keech, 1977; Foster & Ysseldyke, 1976; Foster, Ysseldyke, & Reese, 1975; Gottlieb & Gottlieb, 1977; Gottlieb & Siperstein, 1976; Severance & Gasstrom, 1977); however, some studies have found effects that have been equivocal (McMillan, Jones, & Aloia, 1974). Additionally, the level of an individual's perceived competence has been found to be influencial in producing differential reactions from others (Budoff & Siperstein, 1978; Gottlieb, 1974; Siperstein & Gottlieb, 1977). In fact, to some extent, the labels imply various degrees of competence.

Labels and other characteristics (e.g., competence) seem to serve as expectancy-generating stimuli; that is, they cause individuals who possess them as well as others to make predicitions about future performances. Similarly, expectancy-generating stimuli serve as a basis for assigning attributions to an individual's performance.

An "attribution" can be thought of as the "inference an observer makes about the causes of behavior - either his own or another person's (Bar-Tal, 1978). In discussing an "attributional model of achievement-related behavior," Bar-Tal (1978) presented four primary factors that have been used as causal ascriptions for behavior: luck, ability, effort, and task difficulty; Bar-Tal's discussion was based on Weiner's (1974) attribution theory. Within this framework, ability and effort are considered as internal or under the individual's control while luck and task difficulty are seen as external or not under the individual's control. A second dimension that is seen as differentiating the causal elements within Weiner's model is their stability over time. Luck and effort are considered unstable while ability and task difficulty are thought of as more stable factors. A variety of studies have provided support to the relationships posited by Weiner and his associates (Bar-Tal, 1978; Falbo, 1975; Frieze, 1973; Jones, 1977; Weiner, Frieze, Kukla, Reed, Rest, & Rosenbaum, 1971; Weiner, Heckhausen, Meyer, & Cook, 1972).

The causal ascriptions for a disability may have considerable impact on decisions made about individuals who possess that disability; that is, attributions made as a result of labels assigned to youngsters may have important consequences for the youngsters. For example, if a handicap is seen as stable and internal, particular performances may come to be

expected (and, others not) from individual's who are so handicapped (Algozzine & Mercer, in press). Some research to support this contention has been completed.

LaVelle (1977) found that parents of normal achievers attributed their children's success to ability and failure to luck or lack of effort; parents of a retarded child attributed success to luck and failure to a lack of ability. In a study by Severance and Gasstrom (1977), the attributes of ability, effort, and task difficulty, as well as expectations for future performance were perceived differently for children labeled as "mentally retarded" than for those not similarly labeled. Palmer (1977) found that teachers' attributions for successful or unsuccessful performances were directly related to their instructional prescriptions and Tucker and Rowe (1979) reported that final decisions during an employment interview were influenced by causal interpretations of past achievements.

The purpose of this research was to evaluate the effects of labels and perceived competence on the attributions assigned by special education teachers. It was considered an important area of investigation for several reasons:

1. Research on attributions for special education labels has been minimal.
2. Special education labels and perceived competence are highly interactive characteristics.
3. The importance of attributions relative to future interactions and performances has been established.

For purposes of hypothesis testing, it was assumed that there would be no differences in attributions assigned as a function of diagnostic labels or perceived competence.

Method

Subjects

Forty-six special education teachers served as subjects for this study. Approximately 80% of the group was female; the average age of the participants was 30 years (SD = 7) and average number of years of teaching experience was 6 (SD = 5). Most (54%) of the participants were currently teaching emotionally handicapped youngsters; approximately 20% were teachers in learning disabilities or mental retardation special classes. About half of the teachers were certified in the area in which they were currently teaching and all of the others were in the process of becoming certified in their current teaching area. All of the teachers were certified in at least one area of special education.

Procedure

The subjects were enrolled in a week-long in-service workshop on programming for emotionally handicapped youngsters. As part of the initial orientation. they were asked to supply some demographic information, view a short videotape, review performance data for a child, and complete a 15-item questionnaire.

Videotape. A 12-minute color videotape of a beginning fourth grade boy was shown to the participating teachers. They were told that it was taken during an earlier interview with the child. In the tape, the boy is asked to perform some achievement test items, some perceptual-motor tasks, and engage in a brief free-play period. The tape was designed for use in labeling research (see Foster, Ysseldyke, & Reese, 1975) and all achievement performances were "at grade level." The tape was used in this project simply as a means of presenting the subjects with a more realistic

protrayal of a child than could be represented in a bogus case study.

Case studies. Each participant received a one page "case report summary." It included information suggesting average intellectual ability and some minor behavior problems (e.g., poor study habits, distractibility, etc.). Additionally, half of the summaries contained information from an LD teacher and half from an EH teacher. The reports also suggested that the child went to social studies several times a week from an LD or EH class.

Child performance data. Subjects were told that the child in the videotape had been referred to the summer school program at the university and that samples of his school work accompanied the referral. Each participant was given two completed worksheets; one with a "spelling test" and one with a 20 problem "math test." In half of the group, the score obtained on the tests was 90% or greater; the others indicated 50%-60% correct for the items sampled. The two work samples were manipulated to reflect an individual with relatively high competence for the test items and one with relatively low competence.

Similarly, half the performance samples had "E.H. Summer School" printed across them and half had "L.D. Summer School" indicated. This was an attempt to further manipulate the label assigned to the child thought to have completed the worksheets. In fact, a normal third grade child was asked to fill in the answers according to the predetermined standards of performance.

Under these conditions, then, subjects were randomly assigned to review the performance data of one of four types of children. It was assumed that each participant thought the child they were being questioned

about was an LD boy whose test performance was high, an LD boy whose test performance was low, an EH boy whose test performance was high, or an EH boy whose test performance was low. The effects of manipulating these two independent variables (i.e., label, EH or LD, and competence, high or low) were of interest.

Questionnaire. The extent to which the performance of the child was thought to be due to various attributes was evaluated by a short questionnaire. Subjects were asked to rate the "extent to which" math "performance was due to" (ability, level of task difficulty, chance or luck, his own efforts). A Likert scale, in which 1 = not to a great extent and 5 = to a great extent, was used to record the subjects' responses. Additionally, the participants were asked to indicate what scores (i.e., 0-20%, 21-40%, 41-60%, 61-80%, 81-100%) they thought the child would receive if given a similar math test in the future.

Design and data analysis. Data obtained from the four questions regarding the child's performance were analyzed through a two-factor multivariate analysis of variance procedure. Label (i.e., LD or ED) and competence (i.e., high or low) were the independent variables. The dependent variables were the teachers' ratings of the effect of four variables (i.e., ability, task difficulty, effort, and chance) on the hypothetical child's test performance. Significant multivariate effects were subjected to univariate analyses for each dependent variable as appropriate. Responses to the future performance question were analyzed through a univariate analysis of variance procedure with similar independent variables. The level of significance was set at alpha = .05 and an additional criterion of at least a 0.5 unit difference between means was imposed. This latter decision rule was based on the selected value representing approximately a 10% difference

within the scale; it was used in an attempt to separate significant, important differences from trivial ones.

Results

Multivariate analysis of variance results for subjects' attributions for the math performance yielded a significant main effect for competence (Wilks' Lambda = 0.62, $F = 5.95$, $df = 4,39$, $p < .05$). Additionally, Wilks' Lambda was 0.89 ($F = 1.16$, $df = 4,39$, $p < .05$) for label and 0.93 ($F = .72$, $df = 4,39$, $p < .05$) for the interaction effect of label and competence; the overall multivariate label effect and the interaction effect were not significant at the $p < .05$ level.

The means and standard deviations of the subjects' responses are detailed in Table 1. The summary tables for the univariate analyses of variance for each dependent measure are presented in Table 2. Several significant effects were indicated by the analyses.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

The analysis indicated that teachers' attributions for children with differing degrees of competence were different relative to task difficulty, effort, and chance; for children labeled differently, attributions were different for effort. When the child's test performance was high, the teachers' attributed the results more to task difficulty ($\bar{X} = 3.8$), less to chance ($\bar{X} = 1.4$), and more to effort ($\bar{X} = 4.0$) than when performance was low. Performance was also attributed more to effort when thought to be the performance of an ED child ($\bar{X} = 3.9$) than when thought to be the performance of an LD child ($\bar{X} = 3.4$). In all cases, obtained differences between comparison means (e.g., between ratings of extent to which task

difficulty was cause for math performance in competent vs. incompetent child) were equal to or greater than the 0.5 unit criterion established.

Analysis of subjects' responses to the future performance prediction question yielded a significant main effect for competence ($F = 70.18$, $df = 1, 42$, $p < .05$). The teachers' predictions for the future math performance of a competent or less competant child were different. Their predicitions were similar to the actual performance of the child on the sample "test"; that is, teachers felt that the competent child would likely receive a score of 81%-100% ($\bar{X} = 4.71$) on a similar test and that a less competent child would likely receive a score of 41%-60% ($\bar{X} = 3.18$). The distribution of the subjects' responses among the various categories available for predictions is presented in Table 3. While some subjects felt a competent child's performance would decrease, most (79%) felt it would remain the same; comparable results were indicated for the less competent child.

Insert Table 3 about here

Discussion

In this study, special education teachers were asked to review the performance of a fourth grade boy on a brief videotape presentation and in a short case study report. The attributions the teachers made for the child's "test" behavior were different when the child was represented as more competent or less competent and in one instance when the child was labeled as ED or LD. When a boy thought to have been in special education classes was presented as having performed well (i.e., 90% accuracy), it was thought to be due more to the difficulty level of the task and the

child's effort and less to chance or luck than when he performed poorly (i.e., 60% accuracy); additionally, the performance of a boy thought to be LD was attributed less to effort than when the child was thought to be distrubed.

To some extent, it seems that competence of a student was a more powerful influence with regard to attributions for academic behavior than labels assigned to the student. Previous research had indicated that labels are influential in decisions made by teachers and other professionals; however, when the labels of mental retardation and competence levels were manipulated, competence was found to be the more powerful factor (Gottlieb, 1974). The results of this investigation were similar with regard to two additional labels and a different type of competence (math rather than spelling). When given two characteristics of a case study child, teachers seem to be more influenced by the competence level than by the label assigned to the child.

Also of interest is the extent to which special education teachers reported different attributes as influential for the child's performances. They did not consistently choose stable, internal (i.e., ability or effort) dimensions or unstable, external ones. They did rate task difficulty and effort as important aspects of the competent child's performance; however, whether they felt the task was easy or difficult for him or whether his effort was typical or atypical was not measured.

The participating teachers did feel that the child's future performance would be similar to his past performance. Special education teachers are attentive to a child's functional abilities; they seem to use them as a basis for future expectations. And, while to some extent, that may be

beneficial (as when success breeds success), it may also be harmful if teachers are unwilling to alter their expectations in light of contradictory performance.

The results of this investigation and others like it offer a promising means for altering the effects of labels and other negative expectancy generating stimuli. It seems that competence has powerful, positive effects; teachers and others appear to find competence to be a salient feature on which to make decisions about children. That attributions may be different for competent and less competent individuals suggests that one's performance is the source of a variety of different types of expectations. The assignment or demonstration of various degrees of competence for a youngster may be a useful means of establishing or altering teachers' opinions. For example, an ED child who is about to be mainstreamed and who is portrayed as competent in various school subjects may be viewed differently than one who is portrayed as incompetent or one for whom competence is left undefined. The extent to which these proposed relationships exist in natural school settings and may be altered remains to be shown.

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Footnotes

Bob Algozzine is affiliated with the Institute for Research on Learning Disabilities at the University of Minnesota. The authors wish to express their gratitude to Kim Dooley for professional assistance in preparation of this manuscript.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Ratings of Math Dependent Measures[a]

Label/Competence	Ability $\bar{X}$	Ability SD	Task Difficulty $\bar{X}$	Task Difficulty SD	Effort $\bar{X}$	Effort SD	Chance $\bar{X}$	Chance SD
Learning Disabled (LD)								
High Competence	3.08	1.56	3.50	1.68	3.58	1.08	1.33	.65
Low Competence	2.29	1.11	2.57	1.27	3.29	.95	2.00	1.00
Emotionally Disturbed (ED)								
High Competence	3.08	1.56	4.00	1.21	4.42	.52	1.42	.90
Low Competence	2.91	1.14	2.73	1.49	3.46	1.29	2.00	1.41

[a]Ratings were on a scale from 1 = not to a great extent, to 5 = to a great extent.

Table 2

Analysis of Variance Summary Table for Ratings of Math Dependent Measures

Measure/SV	SS	df	F
Ability			
Label (L)	1.52	1	.84
Competence (C)	3.32	1	1.83
L X C	1.52	1	.84
Error	76.38	42	
Task Difficulty			
Label (L)	1.00	1	.50
Competence (C)	13.10	1	6.57*
L X C	.48	1	.24
Error	83.73	42	
Effort			
Label (L)	4.11	1	4.16*
Competence (C)	6.07	1	6.15*
L X C	.63	1	.64
Error	41.47	42	
Chance			
Label (L)	.03	1	.03
Competence (C)	4.88	1	5.46*
L X C	.20	1	.19
Error	45.22	42	

*p < .05

Table 3

Distribution of Predicted Math Performance for Competence and Less Competent Child[a]

Predicted Performance Level	Type of Child[b]	
	Competent	Less Competent
0 - 20%	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
21 - 40%	0 (0%)	2 (9%)
41 - 60%	2 (8%)	14 (64%)
61 - 80%	3 (13%)	6 (27%)
81 - 100%	19 (79%)	0 (0%)

[a]Entries are the numbers and percentages of subjects indicating each performance level.

[b]The performance level of the competent child was rated by 24 subjects; 22 subjects rated the less competent child.

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